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Pentagon Says Soviet Has Launched First Carrier

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WASHINGTON, Jan. 15 — The Soviet Union has launched its first full-scale aircraft carrier from a shipyard on the Black Sea and has begun building a second, the Pentagon said today.

Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger said the development of carriers able to launch jet fighters represented a major step in the evolution of the Soviet Navy into a more aggressive force that could range far from home.

Some Navy officers and private experts, however, predicted that the carriers would be primarily used in the Norwegian Sea and other waters near the Soviet Union, to hold the United States Navy at bay in the event of a conventional war.

Pentagon officials said today that the new carrier would not be fully operational until the early 1990's. Navy officials and Defense Intelligence Agency analysts have publicly said that it will most likely be 10 years before the carrier and its aircraft are able to operate proficiently.

The Pentagon announcement of the new Soviet ship came as Mr. Weinberger prepared for a renewed struggle with Congress to preserve the United States military buildup, including a plan to increase the number of Navy ships to 600, centered on 15 carriers.

United States intelligence satellites have been following the construction of the new carrier in a shipyard at Nikolayev for several years, and intelligence analysts have been predicting that it will usher in a new era in Soviet naval power.

The Pentagon predicted that the second carrier, whose existence had not been previously disclosed, would be ready for launching within three years.

The Soviet military, traditionally a land power, has gradually expanded its navy in recent years, building a deep-water fleet able to range into the Pacific and the Mediterranean. The

Soviet Navy has three 37,100-ton small carriers that can handle only helicopters and vertical-takeoff aircraft.

Pentagon officials said the new, 65,000-ton, 1,000-foot carrier, launched in December, had a ramp on its bow similar to a ski jump that could be used for launching some types of fighter planes. The carrier also has a long, angled flight deck similar to American carriers, but it is unknown whether Russian shipbuilders have installed the complex system of catapults and arresting gears necessary to launch and recover high-speed fighters.

The vessel is believed to use both nuclear and steam propulsion.

Adm. James D. Watkins, Chief of Naval Operations, said last year in a report on Soviet naval developments that the Russians "lack experience in operating fixed-wing aircraft at sea."

"Consequently," he said, "it could be about 10 years before the new carrier and its air group are capable of operating proficiently."

Pentagon officials said the carrier would enable the Soviet Union to extend its military might beyond the protection of land-based fighter planes, which are usually considered able to provide protection for about 300 miles, and to project its power into third-world conflicts.

"An aircraft carrier is a floating base," Mr. Weinberger said Tuesday night in an interview on the ABC News program "Nightline."

"This will start giving them a capability to engage in conflict and aggression much farther from their shores in a way that will challenge very severely our own naval strength," he said.

A Navy official said a Soviet carrier

could complicate American operations in the Mediterranean, the Indian Ocean, the Pacific and even the Caribbean. "Put a Soviet aircraft carrier off Libya and see how that changes the situation," the Navy officer said.

Michael K. McGwire, a Brookings Institution fellow who is a specialist in Soviet naval affairs, said today that the Soviet Union had always treated its navy as an extra layer to protect its homelands in a general war against the United States.

"It is not an indication of a Soviet intention to move forward into the third world," he said. "That is not to say it could not be used for that. But the Soviet Navy was built for world war."